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STATE FOR NEA/MAG, INR/NESA/NAP

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SUBJECT: Ramadan in Casablanca: Why is This Year Different?

REF: A) Rabat 00990

B) Rabat 01050

C) Casablanca 0947

Classified By: Principal Officer Douglas C. Greene for Reasons 1.4
(b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: According to press reports and personal observations, attendance at mosques throughout Casablanca during the month of Ramadan this year hit an all-time high and the number of youth present was unprecedented. Anti-Western rhetoric was not prominent in "official" mosques although it did find its way into some sermons and prayers. Middle-class Moroccans contacts do not see the dramatic increase of worshipers, at official mosques, as a great concern. They explain the phenomenon as Moroccans' way of showing solidarity with fellow Muslims in the region as well as a way to counter what they perceive as recent attacks against their faith. They do, however, indicate their concern that the numbers of underground mosques throughout Casablanca are growing and encouraging extremist, anti-Western ideology. An ideology, even some pro-Western contacts assert, that is being fueled by a U.S. policy in the region.
End Summary.

Record Numbers at Hassan II

¶2. (U) The Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca is the largest Islamic religious monument outside Mecca. It is designed to hold 25,000 worshipers inside and 80,000 in an outdoor courtyard. On October 17, the last day of Ramadan prayers, approximately 200,000 Casablangans, more than 20 times the average number, crowded into the Mosque and the surrounding area, blocking traffic for hours.

¶3. (C) The Mosque is the showpiece of the Moroccan government and as such is known to adhere strictly to official sermons issued by the Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs. Because of the negative reaction of many Moroccans to the exorbitant costs incurred for the homage to King Hassan II, it has not been well-attended. But last year, during Ramadan, the Ministry hand picked a very popular Imam for the Mosque known, according to the Moroccan weekly news magazine TelQuel, as Casablanca's own "Pop Star" of Islam. The choice was made specifically in order to draw crowds to the Mosque after initial boycotts.

¶4. (C) It is widely known that the authorized sermons and prayers at Hassan II are normally non-political in nature. On October 17, however, according to LES who attended the prayers, there was a

deviation from official policy. LES reported that, as usual, after prayers the Imam asked for blessings for all Muslims, which was greeted with a boisterous and positive response. He followed by appealing for blessings on the King, and received a lackluster reaction, with very few worshipers chanting the traditional "Amin, Amin" in reply. The very popular Imam finished his requests to Allah with a call for "bad wishes to all those causing harm to our brothers in Iraq and Palestine" to which the 200,000 worshipers inside and outside the Mosque responded with a great and prolonged cheer, according to LES.

Why the Increase?

15. (SBU) Some Moroccans speculate that Casablancans attended services in greater number this Ramadan as a reaction to a perceived escalation of Western criticism of Islam. According to these Casablancans, Moroccans feel that by being more devout Muslims they show support for their brothers in Iraq and Palestine while "defending" Islam, in a peaceful manner, from what they believe to be attacks from the West. As examples of the perceived anti-Islamic bent, Casablancans cited an escalation of armed conflicts in the Middle East, the controversial Danish cartoons depicting Mohammad, and the efforts to prohibit Muslim women from wearing headscarves throughout Europe.

16. (C) At an iftar, towards the end of Ramadan, Poloff posed the question of mosque attendance to some Moroccan guests. Two local teachers responded that not only was the protection of Islam and Muslim solidarity the reason for higher attendance at mosques services, but they also believed it was the reason more women are veiling in Casablanca.

Underground Mosques a Concern

17. (SBU) According to Moroccan law, the Ministry of the Habous and Islamic Affairs has authority over all mosques in Morocco and sermons delivered in them. In reality there are numerous "underground" mosques throughout the country and in Casablanca in particular. Longtime residents of Casablanca agree that as many as 80 percent of the city's places of worship are working outside Ministry guidelines. That number is comprised of a combination of official mosques acting outside the ministry's supervision and "underground" mosques with fundamentalist or extremist tendencies located in basements, private homes and apartments, and festival halls. We have heard unsubstantiated claims that Moroccans living and working abroad may be funding some of these mosques. More recently, however, we are hearing that more middle-class Moroccans here are funding the mosques, drawing groups of educated, unemployed, and disillusioned youth to the unapproved sermons.

18. (SBU) After the May 2003 Casablanca bombings, the GOM reinforced its fight against terrorism, in part, by more strictly controlling fundamentalists preaching in Casablanca's poorest neighborhoods, where they were recruiting young men to join their movements. The Ministry of Habous and Islamic Affairs closed some of Casablanca's unofficial mosques and restricted access between prayers in official mosques known to the Ministry to have had more radical Imams. In recent months, official mosques have begun to reopen throughout the day with a host of structured programs offered by the Ministry. Among these programs are those headed by the newly graduated Morchidat (Ref A) who conduct basic education and religious information courses for both men and women. However, despite the GOM's efforts, underground mosques still thrive in Casablanca and find ways to hide from the Ministry's oversight.

Pointing the Finger at the U.S.

19. (C) At two Ramadan iftars, some prominent, pro-Western businessmen discussed their view of factors which have contributed to the developments outlined above. They focused on the impact of U.S. policy in the region on local developments. The U.S. has failed to address longstanding regional grievances, and its counterterrorism

policy is creating new ones, they assert. One result, in Morocco, is the empowerment of fundamentalists. The absence of a strong peace process, U.S. policy toward the Lebanon conflict, and developments in Iraq, are all fodder for these groups in Morocco, and have a significant impact on broader public opinion too, they believe. If the U.S. adjusted its policy to focus on underlying regional disputes, then Morocco would be able to deal more effectively with extremism at home.

¶10. (C) The King's human development initiative, they said, is aimed directly at these threats to stability. The explicit goal is to link Morocco's economic take-off with the poorest elements in society, where extremism finds fertile ground. With the government and fundamentalists vying for influence in the poorest neighborhoods, there is a tough battle for control of the ground going on in Casablanca's urban slums. The government's weapons - training and development programs, housing, job creation, etc. - are up against those of the Islamists. These contacts assert that adjustments in U.S. policy in the region could help to undercut the emotional appeal that Islamists generate in Morocco, and help the Moroccan government create the linkage that the human development program aims to achieve.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Anti-American and anti-Western sentiments in Casablanca ebb and flow following the tide of events in the distant Middle East. During the month of Ramadan, however, the city is more sensitized to issues relevant to the Islamic world, and emotional expressions of solidarity and anger are more prevalent. It is hard to know precisely how much of this is transient, and how much reflects longer-term trends in Moroccan society. We see some evidence that emotions on sensitive regional and religious issues flare more quickly than in the past. On the other hand, tempers cool as quickly as they flare in the city. During the recent war in Lebanon, many regular contacts distanced themselves from the Consulate (Ref C). Since then, many of those who were reluctant to meet with us have once again begun to reach out, albeit a bit more cautiously.

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